

IN ASSAM'S SONITPUR DISTRICT

Project to Reduce Human-Elephant Conflicts Begins



Our Bureau

Kolkata: Apeejay Tea and WWF India on Thursday announced a three-year, joint management project to find lasting solutions to manage the human-elephant conflicts in Assam.

The first phase of project, which focuses on reducing human-elephant mortality levels substantially, will commence immediately with an intensive conflict management effort in Sonitpur district.

As per the plan, a matrix will be developed to calculate the quantum of loss that is usually borne by the tea estates on account of damage to property, including tea bushes and shade trees, infrastructure, and injuries among residents. This matrix will bring the issue in strategic focus and will attract attention and investment for a new agenda for adaptation and management that would benefit the state, region and the country.

The project envisages mapping of the new paths that elephants have established to move away from forests. This will be done for the first time in tea gardens. Securing elephant movement path adjacent to Sessa, an Apeejay Tea garden in Sonitpur, will be the starting point for tracking and early warning of elephants on the move. The route used by elephants through Sessa tea estate will be formalised as a movement corridor.

The corridor will be hedged by a bio fence, in place of the electric fence that has been the norm so far. This is the first time that bio fencing will be used as protection that is safe for elephants and other wildlife. The nurseries for growing the thorny bamboo will be inside the Apeejay tea estates in Sonitpur. These nurseries will be

replicated in other Apeejay tea locations in upper Assam over the next two years.

“The unprecedented fragmentation of elephant habitats has isolated resident wild elephants, leading to an increase in conflict with people living in such landscapes,” said Ravi Singh, CEO, WWF India. “WWF India has been working relentlessly towards managing this conflict in Assam. We welcome Apeejay Tea’s interest in thinking beyond securing their own tea estates in Sonitpur from wild elephant attacks, and considering a holistic approach at reducing wildlife conflict in the state. The partnership has the potential to set an example for collaboration in this region for the benefit of both people and wildlife.”

Over the past few years, the conflict has become more severe with large volumes of crops getting destroyed, people getting killed, and finally elephants being killed in retaliation. Sonitpur, the second-largest district of Assam, is also known to have historically borne the brunt of such conflicts, recording the most human deaths and damage to crops in the state for years. In Sonitpur, there have been 206 human and 131 elephant fatalities between 1996 and 2009.

More than 50% of the conflict-related human deaths have been recorded from the tea estates. From 2001 to 2014, of 245 people who died in Sonitpur due to such conflicts, 128 were from the tea estates. The number of people killed by elephants escalated in 2001, which led to the killing of 32 elephants in retaliation in a single year.

Apeejay Tea, one of India’s largest and oldest tea producers, has four estates in the “hot zone” – Dhulapadung, Ghoirallie, Borjuli and Sessa – in Sonitpur district.